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## Mental preparation of olympic and paralympic swimmers: performance-related cognitions and emotions, and the techniques used to manage them

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### Abstract

*Purpose:* The present study investigated the cognitions and emotions of swimmers, and explored the psychological techniques they use to manage these internal processes prior to and during their best and worst performances. *Method:* Seven Paralympic and five Olympic male Brazilian swimmers took part in this qualitative study. A semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was conducted to explore how swimmers interpreted and experienced specific competitive events and what they did to manage their internal processes, prior to and during what they considered to be their best and worst performances. The process of data analysis included inductive and deductive approaches. Cognitive therapy theory was used to establish some of the themes and sub-themes, also to contribute to the data analysis. *Results:* Functional cognitions and pleasant emotions were more commonly reported by swimmers associated to their best performances, whilst dysfunctional cognitions and unpleasant emotions were more common in their worst performances, both influenced by their beliefs about the preparation during the season. Swimmers used imagery, breathing, music, self-talk, and cognitive restructuring to manage their cognitions and emotions, mainly in the day of their best performances. Although swimmers believed that cognitions and emotions could influence their performances, they reported difficulty identifying, evaluating, and modifying their dysfunctional thinking. *Conclusion:* Our findings suggest that different patterns of cognitions and emotions were related to swimmers' best and worst performances, which were influenced by their beliefs about the preparation during the season. These results support the use of individualized and task-specific mental preparation programs to help athletes identify and manage dysfunctional cognitions and emotions, and elicit adaptive behaviors.

**Keywords:** Psychological techniques; cognitive model; CBTs; athletic performance..

### Introduction

Emotional experiences are the core component of athletes' psychobiosocial states, which also involve cognitive, motivational, bodily, motor-behavioral, and communicative components (Hanin, 2010; Ruiz et al., 2016). Emotional reactions occur as a result of cognitive processing, in which realistic or unrealistic processing of internal stimuli (e.g., cognitions) or external stimuli (e.g., environment) will produce healthy or unhealthy emotional reactions (Hyland & Boduszek, 2012). Athletes would benefit from learning to consider their cognitions as hypotheses, and by testing their validity, they could modify their cognitive appraisals from unhealthy and maladaptive to more evidence-based and adaptive cognitions (Moran, 2012).

Considering the influence of cognitions on people's emotions, cognitive behavioral therapies (CBTs; Beck, 2005; Ellis, 1995) have been successfully applied to a variety of sports modalities (Didymus & Fletcher, 2017; Turner & Barker, 2014; Turner & Davis, 2018). The key construct underlying cognitive behavioral therapies is the concept of *cognitive model* that considers the link between cognition, emotion, and behavior, whereby it is not the situation itself that determines what people feel or how they react, but the way they interpret it that will generate emotions and influence their behavior (Beck, 2011). The integration of psychological preparation to manage these variables should be carefully chosen to meet the requirements of the sport and the athletic skills (Birrer & Morgan, 2010). The use of CBTs within athletes' psychological preparation programs may help them become aware of their cognitions and emotions influencing their performance, and manage internal and external events triggering them (Turner & Bennett, 2018).

CBTs have been used to teach athletes how to identify cognitions also known as *automatic thoughts* (Didymus & Fletcher, 2017; Turner, 2016; Whelan et al., 1991). Automatic thoughts can be functional or dysfunctional generating pleasant or unpleasant emotions, which may influence behavior and sport performance positively or negatively (Beck, 2011; Ruiz et al., 2017). Miles et al., (2016) explored the cognitions of elite athletes associated with a variety of competitive stressors (e.g., selection of players to the game) that resulted in pleasant (e.g., happiness) and unpleasant (e.g., anxiety) emotions. A realistic evaluation of the

event could be useful in modifying cognitions, which in turn influence the experience of emotions and may elicit adaptive behaviors (Beck, 2011; Weaver et al., 2014).

Events, cognitions, and emotions can be interpreted in different ways, based on previous experiences and expectations (Beck, 2011; Mahoney & Avenier, 1977). For instance, in a study by Didymus and Fletcher (2012) with 13 swimmers, more than 200 organizational stressors were appraised as threat, challenge, and harm or loss. One swimmer experienced a particular stressor as a challenge, but the same event was appraised as a threat in a different moment. In another study by Sofia and Cruz (2016) similar findings were observed with experiences of anger related to competition in 269 athletes. Significant differences were found in fight or flight response, anger rumination, antisocial behavior towards teammates and opponents, and self-control among athletes with different levels of anger. Similarly, previous research has found that anger can be perceived as facilitating and debilitating for performance (Ruiz & Hanin, 2011), with 75% of the high-level karate athletes reporting facilitating effects of anger and 60% of the athletes reporting debilitating effects. Taken together, these studies illustrate the importance of identifying cognitions and emotions that influence performance, and the way these internal processes are interpreted by the athletes.

Besides helping individuals identify and respond to automatic thoughts, CBTs also provide a variety of psychological techniques to athletes and teams to manage their internal processes during training and competition. The most common techniques include imagery, self-talk, relaxation or arousal regulation (e.g., breathing), goal setting, and thought management such as cognitive restructuring (Andersen, 2009; Beck, 2011; Didymus & Fletcher, 2017; Gustafsson et al., 2017; Vealey, 2007; Weinberg & Gould, 2015). The psychological demands of a specific sport distinguish which psychological skills are required, allowing the sport psychologist to select psychological techniques to improve the athlete's psychological skills (Birrer & Morgan, 2010; Gould & Maynard, 2009). This topic requires further investigation.

The reported usage of techniques by athletes as part of their psychological skills training in high-intensity sports (e.g., swimming) to enhance performance is increasing (Birrer & Morgan, 2010). According to Birrer and Morgan, high-intensity sport is characterized by an impact duration between 1 and 8 minutes, with a very high-impact intensity and a continuous power output throughout the performance. Due to the demands of the sports in a short time frame, they pointed out the need to manage the high level of stress and pressure, and the pain and fatigue, typical of swimming competition (Birrer & Morgan, 2010). They also highlighted the need for more research related to which psychological training techniques are being used by these athletes, the purposes for their usage, and their effectiveness.

Psychological techniques such as imagery, self-talk, relaxation or arousal regulation, goal setting, and thought management have been extensively used in most sport psychology intervention research (Vealey, 2007), as well as clinical psychology (Beck, 2011), showing positive and sound results (Weaver et al., 2014). Research has demonstrated different ways to execute techniques in sport context (Andersen, 2009; Van Raalte et al., 2016; Vealey, 2007; Williams et al., 2013). Although these techniques can be performed singly or in combination, most research has investigated them separately (Gould & Maynard, 2009; Van Raalte et al., 2016; Vealey, 2007; Williams et al., 2013). Therefore, the effectiveness of psychological preparation including a variety of techniques aimed at managing athletes' internal processes remains unclear, especially when considering high-performance athletes (Dieffenbach & Statler, 2012). High-level athletes are typically very difficult to access and the design of controlled interventions is challenging.

High-level (i.e., Olympic and Paralympic) athletes have reported using psychological strategies to regulate their cognitions, emotions, and psychological responses (Dieffenbach & Statler, 2012). Moreover, research has shown that Olympic and Paralympic athletes display similar psychological skills, indicating that elite athletes, with or without physical disabilities, share similar needs and experiences (Bačanac et al., 2014; Dieffenbach & Statler, 2012). On the other hand, differences in psychological skills were found comparing successful and unsuccessful soccer teams (Coetzee et al., 2006). Additionally, it is suggested that athletes' patterns of cognitions are strongly correlated with successful and unsuccessful performances (Mahoney & Avenier, 1977). Thus, athletes should be encouraged to reflect on the factors that influence their performances, associated cognitions, and emotions (Turner & Barker, 2014).

Research has shown that many athletes experience difficulties in managing their cognitive processes (Birrer & Morgan, 2010; Gould & Maynard, 2009; Vealey, 2007). According to Gould and Maynard, more research is needed, in which mental preparation strategies are contrasted comparing performances (e.g., best vs. worst matches) of the same athlete. Many studies have been conducted on psychological strategies and characteristics of successful athletes, but more is needed to understand the behaviors and attitudes of athletes comparing different levels of performance. Thus, it is relevant to investigate whether and to what extent athletes are aware of their cognitions and emotions, how these influence their performances, and how they manage these internal processes. Therefore, the purpose of the present exploratory study was to investigate the cognitions and emotions of Paralympic and Olympic level athletes before and during what they considered to be their best and worst performances. A secondary purpose was to examine what techniques athletes used to manage their internal processes.

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## Material & methods

### Participants

A purposeful sample of 12 male Brazilian swimmers, five Olympic and seven Paralympic athletes (six with congenital physical disability, and one with severe visual impairment) were recruited. Their age ranged from 22 to 37 years old ( $M = 26.16$ ,  $SD = 4.32$ ). They started swimming when they were 3 to 29 years old ( $M = 10.66$ ,  $SD = 7.03$ ) and they became professional athletes (i.e. signed their first contract) at the age of 14 to 30 ( $M = 17.75$ ,  $SD = 4.09$ ). All athletes participated in one to three Olympic or Paralympic Games ( $M = 1.5$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ). Nine swimmers were sprinters in all four strokes, and three were middle distance freestyle swimmers.

### Instrument

A semi-structured interview was designed with open-ended questions, which permitted an in-depth exploration of how swimmers interpreted and experienced specific competitive events and what they did to manage their internal processes. The interview was separated into three sections: the first section focused on their best performances. At the beginning of this section, the participants were asked to recall what they considered to be the best performance in their careers. They were given time to recall the competition and the specific race, and to speak freely about it to help improve the accuracy of the evoked information. Then, the athletes answered 11 questions, such as *“What did you do in the day of this race?”*, in which they could decide from which moment they wanted to talk about (e.g., at the hotel, at the competition venue). Then, using the mentioned situation, the questions focused on internal processes, for instance: *“What did you feel while you were (e.g. warming up)?”*, and *“What was going through your mind when you felt that way?”*. Also, what was done to manage the cognitions and/or emotions: *“What did you do to manage it?”*. The same set of questions was used to enquire about internal processes and techniques used during the races. The swimmers could speak freely at the end of this section in case they had remembered something or wanted to add information they considered relevant.

The second section of the interview was similar to the first one, but it focused on what the swimmers considered to be their worst performances. They were given time to recall the competition and the race that they considered to be the worst performance in their careers and to speak freely about it, to help improve the accuracy of the recalled information. There were also 11 questions to investigate the internal processes and the techniques used before and during the race mentioned. The third section of the interview contained three questions that investigated the swimmers' awareness about internal processes and the influence on performance, for instance: *“Do you think that there is a relationship between the way you think and the way you feel? Can you tell me more about it?”*. At the end of the interview, swimmers were given the possibility to speak freely to add information they considered relevant.

### Procedure

Ethical approval was gained from the institutional review board where the first and third authors are based. A pilot study was conducted via Skype (video calling software), with a Brazilian professional swimmer to check understanding and flow of questions. Minor amendments were made to the question order to facilitate recollection of the competitive events and the aspects related to them. The first contact was made with the coaches from both teams to explain the study purpose. Then, the coaches provided a list of participants who fit in the inclusion criteria (i.e. males who have participated in an Olympic Game) and their contact information (i.e. cellphone number). Fifteen swimmers were invited to participate in the research and received information about the study purpose and procedures. Twelve athletes agreed to participate in the study and signed an informed written consent. All individual interviews were conducted in Portuguese by the first author at the teams' training site. Following participant consent, the interviews were audio recorded, and lasted from 25 to 40 minutes ( $M = 32.5$  minutes).

### Data analyses

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Due to the exploratory nature of the study qualitative thematic analysis was used. This type of analysis emphasizes the identification, examination, and creation of themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following six phases suggested by Braun and Clarke were followed to create established and meaningful patterns: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing codes and themes, defining themes and giving names, and the final report. Interview transcripts were read several times by the first author to get familiar with the data. Different numbers were assigned to each athlete to ensure the participant's anonymity. Then, codes were developed from the raw data using software ATLAS.ti 7 (Friese, 2014). Themes and sub-themes were developed from the list of codes and patterns. The process of data analysis included inductive (i.e., themes and sub-themes identified from the data) and deductive approaches (i.e., cognitive model). Cognitive therapy (Beck, 2011) theory was used to establish other themes and sub-themes, also to contribute to the final report, in which the competitive events, associated beliefs, and the internal processes were analyzed together.

A second coder created their own codes and themes, which were compared across coders. The divergent codes and themes were discussed, and a consensus was reached. The final list of themes, sub-themes, and the quotes were translated to English, agreed by both coders, and checked by the third author. To maximize research quality, this process of data analysis was employed to secure that there was general agreement between the two coders and the third author on how codes and themes were developed. Also, to secure that all definitions were

clear and inclusive of all the possible types of responses, and not for the purposes of establishing inter-rater agreement, since it does not ensure rigor in qualitative research (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Following recommendations by Smith and McGannon, member checking was not employed as it is unlikely to generate new insights that could be used in further analysis (Tracy, 2010). All the interviews were conducted before the data analysis started. When ongoing analysis is not possible, the quality of data and samples should be able to promote data sufficiency and answer the research questions (Suri, 2011), which was achieved with the in-depth interviews and the purposeful sampling.

## Results

The main emergent themes and sub-themes are presented in Table 1. Since the Olympic and Paralympic swimmers provided similar contents during the interviews, fitting within the same codes and themes, results are presented together. Swimmers identified their best (and worst) performances as best (or worst) results in a race, qualification for a championship, and achieving (or not) their expectations. For both best and worst performances, the swimmers reflected on the same swimming strokes, some times at the same event. For example, one swimmer identified his, best performance during the semi-final and the worst performance during the final in the same championship.

### Cognitive model

In this theme, the cognitions, emotions, and the consequences on performance are presented in Table 2. In their best performances, swimmers' beliefs about the preparation throughout the season contributed to the evaluation of the events. All the swimmers mentioned having had good preparation regarding physical, psychological, and technical aspects, which led them to feel confident and prepared for the competition. Although some events on race day triggered thoughts of doubt, the beliefs about the preparation and previous results in the same day, influenced positively their attitudes. The swimmers reported that they faced the competitions in a similar way, which led them to have a positive attitude towards it: *"I did not face it as a big challenge, I faced it as something that I did every day during practice"* (#12). All swimmers had functional automatic thoughts before their best performances, which led to them experiencing pleasant emotions. Three swimmers also had dysfunctional automatic thoughts, and anxiety was the only unpleasant emotion mentioned by six swimmers before their races. However, they felt secure about performing well and described anxiety as *"nice adrenaline"* (#5).

During the races, the swimmers also had functional automatic thoughts, which influenced pleasant feelings. However, two swimmers had dysfunctional automatic thoughts and the unpleasant feeling mentioned was muscle pain. It was mentioned that external factors were important during the final meters and helped for instance, one swimmer to overcome the pain: *"By the end of the race I was feeling too much pain, and the crowd was a motivational factor in that moment, and I knew it was for me"* (#5). Such cognitions and emotions were seen as beneficial for performance. The swimmers reported being able to accomplish what they had planned, even in the presence of dysfunctional cognitions and unpleasant feelings. Swimmers reported achieving their goals and having what they considered to be their best performances.

Regarding worst performances, beliefs about a lack of preparation led swimmers to have a negative attitude towards the competitive events. Nine swimmers believed that they did not have good preparation during the season, geared to their needs, as mentioned: *"I am sure that the trainings were not what they should have been"* (#4). Dysfunctional automatic thoughts were very common before the worst performances of ten swimmers (see Table 2). These thoughts started weeks or days before the competition, due to personal or professional reasons, such as *"my team ceased its activities"* (#4). Although functional automatic thoughts about the possibility to perform well were mentioned, dysfunctional thoughts were recurrent, and the swimmers did not know how to manage them. On the other hand, two swimmers mentioned being overexcited about the possibility to win a medal, which influenced their emotions positively. Cognitions and emotions were perceived differently in their worst performances. Anxiety was faced as something harmful, with swimmers who reported not having good sensations in the water during the warm-up, not being able to manage such experiences: *"The water was heavy, I was not pulling enough water. Maybe everything was right, but in my head it was not"* (#8).

During the races, dysfunctional automatic thoughts were also very common and generated unpleasant emotions. The cognitions were triggered by internal events, such as comparing themselves with their opponents, or and external events such as and uncertain about the race strategy. They also had positive thoughts, however, according to the swimmers, these were not enough to regulate their dysfunctional cognitions. Swimmers who had high expectations about winning a medal, mentioned having had negative cognitions when the race started: *"I was thinking that I had real chances to be on the podium. But as soon as I started swimming, I messed up the start and for the 50m there is no time to recover"* (#9). There were different negative consequences on performance, for instance swimmers were not able to achieve their goals, could not execute their race strategies following their established plans. Thus, swimmers had what they considered to be their worst performances.

### Psychological techniques

This theme covered the different techniques the swimmers reported using regarding best performances (see Table 3). All swimmers reported using imagery in different moments and for different purposes, mainly on the race day. The time and place influenced the way they used imagery to achieve their goals. The swimmers also

added features to the technique to image the whole race close to their ideal time. The purposes of using imagery were achieved in the best performances, as exemplified: *"I did imagery to count how many strokes I had to do, the rhythm of them, and the force that I had to do in each of the 50 meters, to finish the race the way I wanted"* (#5). Imagery was not reported as being used during the race.

Different breathing techniques were used mainly throughout the race day in different moments by most swimmers, for example: *"During the warm-up I used slow breathing. But right before the announcement, I started doing faster breathing"* (#5). The purposes of using breathing techniques varied, which influenced how they were executed, singly or along with other techniques. During the race, swimmers used rhythmic breathing or held their breath, both as part of their race strategies. Only one swimmer stated that not using breathing techniques.

Music was used by seven swimmers, with four of them used it with specific focusing purposes, and three of them using music as a distraction. The swimmers used different musical genres in various moments throughout the race day, mainly at the competition venue, used along with some other techniques. Music was reported as being part of the swimmers' daily routines, helping them to be prepared: *"Music is part of my routine during practice. When I listen to music in the competition, my brain knows that it is time to go hard"* (#2). Three swimmers stated not liking to use music in any moment.

Self-talk was used in different moments at the competition venue. Motivational and instructional self-talk were used along with some other techniques, as illustrated: *"I told myself how I would swim and the rhythm of the strokes while I saw myself swimming"* (#4). The different purposes for the use of self-talk were achieved in the best performances. During the races, instructional and motivational self-talk were used by six swimmers. Five swimmers mentioned that they did not use self-talk, indicating that they had never practiced this technique before, thus, they did not feel confident it could be useful.

Lastly for the best performances, cognitive restructuring was used mainly throughout the race day, at the competition venue. The swimmers stated that this technique helped them to have more realistic cognitions, reconsidering their emotional states, as exemplified: *"I was anxious, but then I thought about it and, in fact it was not anxiety, it was desire to swim, I knew my potential"* (#7). During the race, four swimmers reported using cognitive restructuring to manage internal and external factors, such as opponents, as illustrated: *"I thought 'I am pushing hard as I always do, and I am losing him. Am I right or he is risking? No, I think that he is risking, I will do it my own way'"* (#12).

As Table 4 shows, the use of techniques to manage the internal processes of swimmers in their worst performances was less frequent. Swimmers executed the techniques in different ways and moments, with the purpose of modifying dysfunctional cognitions and unpleasant emotions, however, they reported not being able to manage to use them effectively. Imagery was used in less varied ways mainly in the week and the race day. Only one swimmer mentioned having achieved his goals using this technique. Six swimmers did not use imagery because they were unfamiliar or uncertain about using it: *"I was afraid that if I had done that, it could worsen my emotional state"* (#8). One swimmer did not use imagery, believing he had a chance to be on the podium: *"I was thinking 'I'm going to win, this medal is mine'. So, for this race I did not do imagery, I was thinking about the medal and I forgot that firstly I had to swim!"* (#9).

Deep and slow breathing was mentioned, followed by deep and fast breathing to manage emotional states, mainly at the competition venue. Breathing was also used along with some other techniques. Three participants reported such techniques being successful momentarily helping them to achieve the intended purposes. During the race, one swimmer used rhythmic breathing as part of his race strategy. Moreover, three swimmers mentioned that breathing techniques were not used, as they reported not knowing how to use them effectively.

Five swimmers reported using music throughout the race day, with three of them indicating having been able to regulate their emotional states. Three swimmers mentioned that at that time, they did not use music or they had not considered using it for specific purposes, and three other swimmers believed that music could trigger some other unintended emotional states.

Motivational self-talk and positive self-talk were used mainly at the competition venue, however swimmers reported that they were not effective. During the race, three swimmers mentioned having used negative self-talk, believing they did not have any chance to succeed. Additionally, instructional self-talk was reported to be ineffective, as exemplified: *"I was screaming to myself, but my body was not responding"* (#1). Four swimmers stated not using self-talk.

Lastly for the worst performances, one swimmer achieved his goals using cognitive restructuring at the competition site. According to this participant, other techniques were not as effective in managing dysfunctional cognitions and emotions, as mentioned: *"Analyzing the thoughts and understanding where they come from is the most valid technique to me, more helpful than thinking positively, breathing, or positive self-talk"* (#2). The five swimmers who used cognitive restructuring in their best performances reported not been able to apply this technique in their worst performances and were unable to manage their cognitions and emotions, as shown: *"I noticed that there was something wrong in the swimming technique, and instead of focusing on improving it, I focused on the feeling of something being wrong"* (#8).

The techniques mentioned above were reported to assist the swimmers to manage their cognitions and emotions successfully in their best performances. In contrast, this did not the case in their worst

performances. Eleven swimmers mentioned that they learned the techniques or got better at utilizing them to achieve specific purposes with the help of a practitioner, as stated: *“Most of the techniques that I know like imagery, especially how to evaluate my thoughts, I learned with my psychologist”* (#2). Other sources, such as *“yoga classes”* (#1) and *“observing other swimmers”* (#6) were also effective for swimmers to learn how to use effective breathing techniques and music to regulate their internal experiences. Eight swimmers had their worst performances prior to their best performances, which led to seven of them starting a systematic psychological preparation.

#### **Perceptions about cognitions-emotions relationship and the influence on performance**

In this theme involving swimmers' perceptions about the relationship between cognitions, emotions, and performance, ten swimmers mentioned that there was an interplay, in which positive or negative cognitions trigger emotions, while two swimmers said that this relationship only existed occasionally. Eight swimmers believed that cognitions trigger emotions, but that they both influenced each other, as reported: *“Everything that you think will generate emotions, and if you are not aware of it, the negative emotions will worsen your thoughts”* (#5). All swimmers believed that cognitions and emotions played an important role and influenced their performances. They also stated that functional cognitions facilitated their performance, letting them perform to the highest of their capabilities, whereas dysfunctional cognitions prevented this from happening.

Ten swimmers mentioned using techniques and strategies to regulate dysfunctional cognitions and unpleasant emotions, with six swimmers indicating that they tried to evaluate their cognitions, searching for evidence to confirm or deny them. According to the swimmers, realistic thinking helped them manage cognitions and regulate their emotions, helping them being more aware of situations, and carry out their plans, as exemplified:

*“On its way to the competition venue, the bus got lost. Everybody was desperate, and I thought ‘Wait, let’s make it happen, what can I do?’.... When everything was OK, whereas some people were shaking, I took a deep breath and I thought ‘Ok, everything is solved now, let’s work’. So, it is about knowing how to think during these moments”* (#2).

Three swimmers mentioned using positive thinking to deal with potential negative cognitions and unpleasant emotions. However, the swimmers also stated that being unsure about the effectiveness of this strategy. Moreover, the importance of a good preparation during the season, and a pre-performance routine were raised, both to manage their dysfunctional internal processes and to distract themselves: *“Even if I am feeling weird or having negative thoughts, I know that if I follow my routine, I will do everything that I need, and then, I forget what I was thinking”* (#9). Two swimmers indicated not having a specific plan to manage their internal processes and not being sure about how to do it.

#### **Discussion**

The present study investigated the cognitions and emotions of 12 Olympic and Paralympic swimmers before and during their best and worst performances. Furthermore, what techniques the swimmers used to manage these internal processes were investigated. Regarding the first theme, it was presented that for the Olympic and Paralympic swimmers, their beliefs about the preparation during the season influenced their evaluation about the competitions. In their best performances, swimmers considered the preparation a positive aspect that helped them to achieve these results. In the case of worst performances, swimmers believed that there was a lack of preparation, which influenced negatively their performances. These results add relevant information, since they show the swimmers' sources of the cognitions and emotions. It can explain the way that swimmers faced the competitive events, since according to Beck (2011), the beliefs can influence the way that situations are perceived. It corroborates the statement that the facilitative interpretation of cognitive and somatic variables is considered as suitable to fulfill the psychological demands of many sports (Birrer & Morgan, 2010). Moreover, Deen et al., (2017) have shown that changes in irrational beliefs led to pleasant emotions and more adaptive behaviors.

Functional cognitions leading to pleasant emotions were more common before best performances, while swimmers managed successfully dysfunctional cognitions and unpleasant emotions. On the other hand, dysfunctional cognitions and unpleasant emotions, more common in worst performances, were difficult to be managed by the athletes. Regarding the influence of beliefs on internal processes, these cognitions seemed to have been generated by the swimmers' beliefs about the season, and those patterns are related to their behaviors. Additionally, the same emotion (e.g., anxiety) was perceived differently in both performances, suggesting that it was reappraised, influenced by those beliefs. These findings concur with those of Mahoney and Avenier (1977), as well as Coetzee et al., (2006), who suggested that patterns of cognitions and psychological skills correlate with successful and poor performances. The findings are also in line with the notion that athletes' experiences are individual and can have facilitating or detrimental effects on their performance depending on their appraisals of the situation, their experiences, and the capability to deal with task demands (Ruiz et al., 2017; Ruiz & Robazza, 2020).

Regarding the second theme, all swimmers applied psychological techniques mostly before their best performances, and the time and purpose of the techniques influenced their execution. These findings corroborate

with previous studies, which suggested that multiple types of techniques are important for athletes' success, giving them more options to cope with emotions (Gustafsson et al., 2017) and different situations of training and competitions (Birrer & Morgan, 2010; Weinberg & Gould, 2015). The present findings are also in line with the notion that athletes tend to use mental techniques more in competitions than in practice (Vealey, 2007). Additionally, the fact that Olympic and Paralympic swimmers reported using same techniques for similar purposes, concurs with the idea that these elite athletes face similar preparation needs and skill demands (Dieffenbach & Statler, 2012).

Swimmers started practicing imagery weeks before the competition, and all of them used it in the day of their best performances. Imagery was executed in different ways, involving several dimensions to make it more realistic. Moreover, the swimmers reported that this technique helped them to manage internal processes in their best performances. The present findings support those of Williams et al., (2013), who indicated that the timing influences how the technique is used. It is thus, recommended that athletes should be encouraged to practice imagery daily, more vividly, rehearsing for instance, overcoming barriers and what they would like to accomplish in a competition (Vealey, 2007; Williams et al., 2013).

Breathing techniques were used to regulate the emotional states of swimmers before their races, and also as part of their race strategies. Research has indicated that sprinters for instance, do hyperventilation before races to try not to breathe during them (Jacob et al., 2015). Williams and Andersen (2007) have suggested that deep breathing exercises can lower physiological activation level, whereas short breathing exercises can increase the activation level. The use of breathing exercises along with relaxation and meditation are in line with Beck (2011), who suggested that people can benefit from learning these techniques to manage stress symptoms.

The athletes used different musical genres with specific purposes, also used it only as distraction. This information can illustrate the statement that music may be used as distraction because of the emotions it evokes, to regulate emotions, to enjoy or comfort themselves, and to relieve stress (Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008). Research indicates that music can help swimmers regulate their performance related states (Middleton et al., 2017), and facilitate flow states (Norsworthy et al., 2017), which can help explaining the purposeful use of it by the athletes.

Self-talk was reported to beneficially assist the swimmer to change cognitions or emotions before and during best performances, although the same effect was not mentioned in the worst performances. Self-talk is ideal when it helps athletes to direct attention, to be motivated, and to focus on the task (Van Raalte et al., 2016; Vealey, 2007), such as the instructional self-talk reported. However, self-talk may lead to overthinking, disturbed focus, and unpleasant emotions, and positive self-talk, which helps momentarily to deviate from what is disturbing, can actually worsen the emotional state (Moran, 2012; Van Raalte et al., 2016). This statement can be exemplified by the swimmers who did not want to use this technique and preferred to manage their internal processes in some other way.

Cognitive restructuring assisted some of the swimmers to be aware of their internal processes, to evaluate their dysfunctional automatic thoughts and regulate their emotions. Cognitive restructuring has been widely used to help individuals reappraise their internal processes (Beck, 2011; Didymus & Fletcher, 2017; Turner & Davis, 2018; Weaver et al., 2014). For instance, female field hockey players reduced the amount of threat and loss appraisals, and increased challenge appraisals when were educated about this technique (Didymus & Fletcher, 2017). However, individuals' perceived ability to modify the meaning of a situation to change their emotions is important (Robazza & Ruiz, 2018). This was exemplified in our study but the fact that although known by the swimmers, there were some techniques they did not use intentionally, as they have not been practiced before or were not confident they could implement them effectively. The swimmers learned or improved the way they practiced the techniques with a sport psychologist, after having their worst performances. The purposeful use of a variety of techniques mainly before the swimmers' best performances enrich the discussion about mental preparation towards high-intensity sports. Furthermore, both Olympic and Paralympic swimmers mentioned that due to their psychological preparation, they were able to use the techniques in different ways to achieve their purposes. When mental training is guided by a specialist, it gives athletes more chances to achieve their goals (Arnold & Sarkar, 2015; Haberl & McCann, 2012). Also, individualized preparation creates awareness of athletes' optimal psychological and physiological performance states using different tools with specific purposes, especially when time is given to practice them (Hays, 2012).

The swimmers were aware of the relationship between cognitions and emotions, and all of them believed that internal processes could influence performance. However, six swimmers knew how to manage cognitions to produce lasting results, whereas the other six did not know how to identify, evaluate, and change their thinking. It is understandable, since they did not know how to use cognitive restructuring. Athletes would benefit from learning to consider their cognitions as hypotheses, and by testing their validity, they could modify their cognitive appraisals from dysfunctional to more evidence-based and adaptive cognitions (Moran, 2012). Expanding the repertoire of techniques helps to increase the sense of control, and the management of internal processes (Beck, 2011; Gould & Maynard, 2009). Moreover, the application of CBTs in high-intensity sports can offer a deep understanding about the influence of internal processes on performance.

The results of the present study should be interpreted considering its methodological strengths and limitations. It was not determined what best or worst performances should be, neither a limited time span was specified for the competitive events to be remembered. It may have influenced the way the memories were



recalled. This is one of the difficulties in qualitative research when assessing emotions and related cognitions, and the time they occurred (Ntoumanis & Jones, 1998). The sample size, and participants' nationality, do not permit external validity. However, the elite level of the swimmers considered a strength. Furthermore, the in-depth nature of the findings highlights the importance of awareness of internal processes and their management, which can reinforce the importance of individualized psychological preparation. Future research should investigate if athletes can change their internal processes before and during competitions to have a better performance, since the current study investigated specifically the best and the worst ones. Since this present study used a qualitative approach, future research should also investigate the cognitions and emotions of athletes using standardized questionnaires, in larger samples of athletes across different cultures. Longitudinal study designs can provide more information about how cognitions and emotions are managed, as well as how and when the techniques are executed. Finally, sport psychologists should first evaluate the psychological requirements of the sport as well as the level of the athlete before implementing a psychological training program.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the present findings suggest that different patterns of cognitions and emotions were related to swimmers' best and worst performances, which were influenced by their beliefs about their preparation during the season. Olympic and Paralympic swimmers reported some similarities regarding the patterns in their internal processes, and how they tried to manage them. Moreover, the findings suggest the type of psychological techniques used and their purposes in high-intensity sport. The practice and systematic use of the techniques reported helped swimmers to achieve different intended purposes, likely because their mental preparation was individualized and task-specific. Although the swimmers believed that internal processes influence performance, they mentioned some difficulties to manage their dysfunctional cognitions, for instance how to identify and evaluate them. Overall, our findings indicate that cognitive restructuring was useful in helping swimmers to manage internal processes.

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